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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
VFW ANNUAL CONGRESSIONAL DINNER
THE SHERATON PARK HOTEL

8:48

Thank you very, very much, Pete.

My dear friend, Congressman Eddie Hebert, my former colleagues in the House as well as in the Senate, distinguished members of the VFW and guests:

Obviously it is a very great privilege and pleasure to be here tonight and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the very warm welcome. All I can say is it feels as warm and as comforting as a ray of Florida sunshine. (Laughter)

As a very proud member of VFW Old Kent Post 830, let me say how happy I am to be here with you tonight at this Annual Banquet for Members of Congress. If I were to go back and count how many times I have come as a Member of the House joining all of the VFW members from Michigan and my own hometown, I have had many, many enjoyable and delightful evenings, and I thank you for those occasions as well as this affair tonight.

At this Annual Banquet let me pay tribute to and congratulate Joanne Larson and all of the other winners of the VFW Voice of Democracy contests. You have had some great winners in the past, you have got some great winners tonight, and I think it is a great program that the VFW can be proud of not only this year but for all of the years. And I strongly hope, Pete, that the VFW will continue this program in the future.

Let me start out by saying that this afternoon at the White House I received a visit from a fellow Michigander named Marla Maraquin, the VFW Buddy Poppy Girl for 1976. As an interested observer, let me say what a sweet young lady. As she left, she whispered "goodbye, Jerry." (Laughter) Well, she is a charming 12 year old gal from the VFW's National Home in Eaton Rapids and I know she will help all of us to have a very successful Buddy Poppy campaign this year.

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I suspect that many of you in this audience have visited the VFW Home in Eaton Rapids. If you haven't, you should; it is a great, great inspiration and she will do for that Home and for all of us and especially for the young people who are there -- her job will make it easier for all of us to be very proud of that effort, that Home and the VFW.

Marla, good luck and God bless you.

I recall just about a year ago, maybe a year and a half ago, I had the honor of speaking to your 75th National Convention shortly after I became President and at that time I had the pleasure of announcing to the Convention that I was supporting Dick Roudebush, my former colleague in the Congress and a past National Commander of the VFW, to be head of the Veterans Administration. I said then that I was completely confident that Roudy would be a first class Administrator, and 18 months later I am glad to say we can all agree he has done an outstanding job in that great responsibility.

Roudy's fine work as an Administrator assures that veterans are going to get the most out of their new VA budget for fiscal year 1977 as they did in 1975 and in 1976.

Now despite the fiscal constraints that we have to be realistic about, the budget that I submitted to the Congress includes a record amount of over \$4 billion for VA medical care. The budget include requested funds for more than 9,000 new VA medical personnel in the budgets for fiscal year 1976 and 1977.

What it proves is precisely this. We in this Government, the Executive as well as the Legislative, will provide more funding, more people and even better facilities to give eligible veterans the highest quality and fastest possible care that we can provide.

One of our very distinguished Members of the Congress who shares my concern for veterans is my very good friend, Eddie Hebert, whom all of you are rightly honoring tonight. I have respected Eddie's enormous talents and tremendous capabilities ever since I entered the Congress in 1949. At that time he had already spent almost a decade in the House of Representatives and he had been serving the American public even longer than that as a gifted and courageous journalist in his home State of Louisiana.

We have served in the Government together and it has been a great experience, Eddie, for more than a quarter of a century. Over that period we have always enjoyed -- and I mean really enjoyed -- a very closer personal relationship which I cherish.

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I have always had a very special respect for two things that Eddie Hebert has stood for throughout his career. He has always been a strong supporter of responsible fiscal responsibility and sensible restraints on Government spending, and he has always stood for something else -- and I know all of us in this room tonight believe in -- a strong and secure United States of America, and I salute you, Eddie, for that policy.

Eddie and I have fought shoulder to shoulder for high defense dollars and the strongest military capability for all of our forces, and in retrospect it has been right and we should be proud of the fact that that policy has generally prevailed. Our Administration's foreign policy and our Government defense policy are actually a single national policy which can be summed up in three words -- peace through strength.

Let's take a moment to look at what those three words mean. We are all in favor of peace, and for a veteran the word "peace" has a very special meaning. Those of us who have seen war cherish the comradeship that we enjoyed as individuals brought together under uniquely demanding circumstances and each of us in our own way could recite instances where those comradeships have meant much to us over the years.

But we remember the friends we lost as well as the friends we made. We will never forget the terrible cost of war in terms of human suffering, in blood and pain and lives cut tragically short.

Another world war, as we are aware, would mean death and destruction on a scale so vast that human minds could hardly comprehend it, and so peace today is more imperative than ever. Whatever our field of endeavor -- in private life, in business, in Government -- we know that in a nuclear age there can be no lasting accomplishments without a lasting peace.

The United States, we are proud to say, is a peaceful Nation and we are a strong Nation. History has taught us that we can remain at peace only if we remain strong. We can remain free only if we remain firm. And most importantly, we can remain proud Americans only if we stand ready to defend America.

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One measure of our strength as a nation is our deep rooted belief in freedom. For 200 years our faith in government by the people for the people has endured. We have had the strength to resist the strains that might have broken the will of others. Our strength is meant that we as a people are not easily intimidated. We can recognize and respond to real danger without crying wolf at a false one. Our national strength is surpassed by no other nation. Our fighting forces are second to none. We are a strong nation in physical equipment and will, and to suggest otherwise in my opinion is irresponsible and wreckless, but we must continue to make sure that we will stay a strong nation.

The defense budget I submitted as President last year, the first one I had the privilege of submitting to the Congress, was more than \$100 billion. I think the Congress went too deeply in cutting it, but that is history. This year I have gone to the Congress with a record peace time defense budget of more than \$112 billion. It sounds like a lot of money, and it is, but that money is well spent.

It is well spent if we deter aggression, maintain the peace and make certain and positive that our national security is secure. It is the best investment that we can make, and I urge all of my former colleagues and the new ones in the Congress and all of you to stand up and sell it to make sure that we have the necessary wherewithal so that no enemy will be tempted and no ally will be insecure. We have to have this kind of military capability and I hope and trust from the bottom of my heart that we get the necessary weaponry, the necessary training, the necessary planning, the necessary will in all 215 million Americans so that we don't have to worry, we just have to be strong in equipment as well as in will.

I am sure that Eddie Hebert feels as I do -- we always did. We had a few differences on the floor of the House on occasion but that was good exercise for both of us. But the main point is that Eddie Hebert and I have -- he as a Democrat and I as a Republican -- we believed in the traditional bipartisan spirit in favor of national security, and I am an optimist to believe that that same spirit prevails today in the House as well as in the Senate; that even in an election year the need to maintain a strong national defense is more pressing than politics -- it darn well better be.

So I am confident that all of us who feel this way have a mission to perform. Individually and collectively we will pursue a policy of peace through strength, we will make sure that America remains as strong -- and I underline strong -- as she is free now and forever.

Thank you very, very much.

END

(AT 9:02 P.M. EST)